

The Place of Children in the Family

Introduction

Do you believe that God could have created things any way He wanted? I mean, have you ever thought 'what if God made the sky red instead of blue?' you're waiting on some State vs. Carolina joke, aren't you ☺? What about, I don't know..., 'why not make bunny rabbits roar like lions?'no? Surely there's *something* like that you've wondered!

How about this one, which – by the way – I began to wonder about 14 years ago when our 1st child, Kaitlyn, was born..... 'Why didn't God make pregnancy result in a walking, talking, able to take care of themselves person?' I mean, He created the first people like that didn't He? Why not just go to the hospital and be placed under general anesthesia, have a rib extracted, wake up, and go home a day or two later with a fully functional, able to contribute to society human being?...because I wonder about things like that...

My name is Scott Culbreth and I'm one of the elders here at Grace Community. I'm probably better known as 'Keisha's husband'. She and I began attending almost 15 years ago now – back when the church was meeting over at the middle school. Since then, all three of our children were born, dedicated, and baptized here. In fact, it was 14 years ago today – on Mother's Day – that Kaitlyn was dedicated as a 1 month old here in this family. God has allowed us to enjoy being part of this family in many ways over the years. From leading music on Sunday mornings, to participating and leading multiple home groups (I've lost count), teaching Sunday school, serving as a deacon, Keisha coming onto staff as children's ministry director, and in more recent years serving you in the role of elder...along the way there have been many meals shared, several trips taken, birthdays celebrated, hardships shared. I'm thankful to have been in lock step with you – my brothers and sisters – for so many years. I feel like as God adds to your nuclear families, that He's adding to mine and Keisha's many little nephews and nieces. It's a joy being part of this family that God has established.

Now back to my ludicrous question – notwithstanding the potential physical complications of birth resulting in adults rather than infants, aren't you glad that God did it the way he did? Little babies are wonderful aren't they? I mean who wouldn't welcome sleepless nights, cleaning up vomit and poopie? And then they start getting bigger and able to move around and get into things and learn to throw temper tantrums...and force us to learn a whole new language – because they can't simply tell us their needs yet, at least not in English. Who wouldn't welcome the opportunity to pack half the house when you need to go down the street for a few hours? And figuring out just how forceful, I mean creative, you should be when they won't eat their food or take their medicine...aren't kids great? Wondering whether I might find some useful or famous thoughts that others have had concerning children, I consulted Google and found a few....

Quotes

Boy, n.: a noise with dirt on it. ~Not Your Average Dictionary

A little girl is sugar and spice and everything nice — especially when she's taking a nap. ~Author Unknown

You can learn many things from children. How much patience you have, for instance. ~Franklin P. Jones

Having a two-year-old is like having a blender that you don't have the top for. ~Jerry Seinfeld

“Before I got married I had six theories about raising children; now, I have six children and no theories.”
— John Wilmot

While we try to teach our children all about life,
Our children teach us what life is all about.
~Angela Schwindt

I love these little people; and it is not a slight thing when they, who are so fresh from God, love us.
~Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*

There's nothing that can help you understand your beliefs more than trying to explain them to an inquisitive child. ~Frank A. Clark

Dwight L. Moody, evangelist
"If I could relive my life, I would devote my entire ministry to reaching children for God!"

Just think of the world without children, though. This would be a completely different kind of planet. And this family would be nothing like the beautiful thing that we know it to be without God making this human experience include these things called children, and by having them come into the world as small, helpless, and needy. And, as with all things that God has done, there is deep purpose and meaning working just behind the scenes when it comes to these little ones' place in our family.

Children Are Examples To Us

Maturing Christians Need Children

Children Need Mature Christians

[1) God uses children to provide an example to us of what we should become, 2) God uses children to provide us an opportunity to exercise our faith – we need them, in other words, for ‘on the job training’, if you will, in sanctification, 3) God uses maturing believers to provide children an opportunity to receive the imprint of Christ – His character – through agents of God to them – parents, leaders, teachers, ...aunts, uncles...etc.] Our first text this morning is from Matthew 18, verses 1-6. Please stand as I read.

God's Gift To Us – Children As Examples To Us

Matthew 18: 1-6

1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” 2 And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them 3 and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

5 “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, 6 but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

Thoughts:

The place of children among us, what should be our correct view of them – and the place of children in the kingdom of God, His view of them – is outlined/explained as Jesus is addressing the *adults'* question – in Mark 9, it says *argument* – about which one of them was 'greatest'.

So what is Jesus talking about 'becoming like one of these'? I think he gives us insight in the three parables that follows this conversation...but first of all, I want to make sure that we clearly zero in on this child that Jesus 'put in the midst of them'. In Mark chapter 9, the parallel of this Matthew 18 account, it says that Jesus took the child in his arms.

Now, if I were to survey a hundred Americans and have them give me the first age that popped into their mind when they heard the word 'child', I'm sure that I would get ages anywhere from infancy on up to about 26 years old. [Now before anybody goes and gets upset – may I remind you that I'm just guessing that SOME Americans might place SOME people in the child category through 26 years of age. I didn't say I THOUGHT ANYONE IN HERE FIT THAT DESCRIPTON!! ☺] And if were to ask them to rate the relative status or importance of children in our society, do you think children would be thought to be VERY important, only MARGINALLY important, or NOT VERY important? I think overall it would be obvious that children have a fairly high status in our society.

But it just was not so in the culture in which the disciples were hearing this teaching from Jesus. The fact that Jesus was holding up a child as an example, if I understand Brad correctly, was as radical as Jesus taking the job of the lowliest servant, when he was supposed to be a king, and washing the disciples' feet; or as radical as when He clearly elevated the status of women through acts of kindness, healing, and receiving from them not only publically but sometimes even publically in the synagogues! I found this statement on the internet, but believe I've heard it before so I felt it was likely accurate and safe to share to highlight this point. [In biblical times] there were [Jewish] rabbis who prayed every day:

"I thank Thee, God, that I was not born a Gentile, a dog, or a woman." And if culturally, that's any indication of how women were thought of, it's definitely not a stretch at all to think that children were not seen as terribly noteworthy in society.

And remember, as Mark indicates by saying that Jesus picked the child up in his arms, this was a very little person most likely...which the Greek seems to support. The word for child used here is παιδίον (paidion 3813) which indicates a little or young child or maybe even an infant.

So with these two facts clearly in the front of our minds – that this was a very small child and that it was radical that a Jewish rabbi was holding up a child to teach a lesson – let's look at the three sections – 2 parables and 1 direct instruction – following Jesus' radical statement that his disciples (and by extension, we) must become like the child in His arms.

- **vs. 12-14 – Lost sheep.** How is childlikeness seen here? Recognize you may be lost – this is tough, sometimes, to see any other way than retrospectively. But the fact remains that a child can be stubborn like a sheep and end up lost because they are running away from protection. Also, a child can just be simply un-wise, not aware that they have wandered away from their place of protection. And, whether through stubbornness or just lack of wisdom, the sheep/child is in need of rescue. Is Jesus, thus, asking us to go get ourselves lost and into trouble? Of course not! But He is saying at least...**1) you don't have the tools – the strength or wisdom – to find your own way to the flock. He must rescue you!** 2) **If you hear His voice, it means you are His!** What delights a kid's heart more than seeing their parent walk through the door after a day at work and hearing that voice 'I'm home'? Humble yourself and respond to His voice!
- **vs. 15-20 – Jesus's instruction on how to deal with offenses between believers** (between family members)...Now, I may be reaching a bit here, but perhaps there is an example of a childlikeness on display here. Being willing to say to someone else that they hurt you, WITH THE GOAL BEING TO 'WIN THEM BACK' (NLT), seems to me something that kids do better than adults. Now, I fully recognize that this doesn't happen typically in a quiet, orderly fashion all at the same time. Typically there are two stages – **1) a passionate "YOU HURT ME!!"** along with maybe hurting back and then, though it can seem really slow to us as parents, **2) a making up** and everyone's having fun again and laughing. Can you, like a child, admit to someone that they hurt you – perhaps very deeply – and then move as quickly as a kid can to accepting them back if they listen (meditate on verse 15....I know if you're deeply hurt that the temptation will be to focus on what Jesus is saying to the other person – they indeed must listen and confess the wrong. But what is your attitude and goal in bringing the offense to their attention? Are you wanting to **hurt** them back or **win** them back? Keep in mind, the context here is believer to believer – family member to family member. This is someone who has been redeemed by Christ and with whom you will spend eternity. Shouldn't your approach, even when you're deeply hurting, be to **win** them back?). If you struggle with this idea...let's look at the next parable:
- vs. 21-35 – short version – Guy that was forgiven a huge debt (Some calculate the talent in the parables to be equivalent to 20 years of wages for the common worker – NLT says that it was millions of dollars) that he owed to a king and then went and did not forgive a very small debt

(NLT says a thousand dollars) that was owed to him. In fact, he had the guy thrown into prison. Do I incorrectly observe that kids are WAY BETTER forgivers than adults?

- What's the binding tie here? Verse 4 – Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven....in fact, one commentator says that [quote]“The child is held up as an ideal, not of innocence, purity, or faith, but of humility and unconcern for social status. Jesus advocates humility of mind, not childishness of thought. With such humility comes childlike trust.”[end quote] Look back to those three sections of scripture again. Don't you see how humility is highlighted in each instance – the humble state of the sheep with few, if any abilities – the humility of the offended believer who desires to win back a brother – the lack of humility in the servant whose had a huge debt forgiven but then was unwilling to forgive a small debt owed to him?

Another place where a small child's characteristics are lifted up as a clear example to us is in Psalm 131. And here again, we see humility as a theme.

Psalm 131

1 O LORD, my heart is not lifted up;
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.
2 But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child is my soul within me.
3 O Israel, hope in the LORD
from this time forth and forevermore.

Thoughts:

Like a child that is weaned who is becoming old enough [*mature* enough] to understand that his or her [*perceived*] needs may not necessarily need to be met RIGHT NOW but can and will be met in time – like the weaned child, who is still young [*child-like*] enough to not concern themselves with the many what-ifs of life that can lead to worry, doubt, fear – which, in the extremes, can lead either to depression on one hand or to over-confidence and self-reliance on the other – we “adults” are called to quiet our souls and take a sober, lowly, humble view of ourselves. And though both of the extremes above (depression or self-reliance) are problematic for us and create all kinds of heart-ache, I don't think these facts by themselves provide enough reason for us to muster a willingness to achieve weaned child-likeness.

I believe the heart of the matter is summed up in verse 3 – O Israel, put your hope in the LORD – now and always. The REAL CORE ISSUE is that our HOPE in the LORD is compromised when pride creeps in, when our eyes betray to others that we think we're 'all that and a bag of chips'.

Before you focus in on how difficult achieving this elusive balance of old enough to not be a whiny little baby, but still young enough to realize your utter dependence on your mother, it should be pointed out that this Psalm is a 'song of ascents' or 'of degrees' or 'of steps'. Many scholars believe these psalms were sung by worshippers as they ascended the road to Jerusalem to attend the three pilgrim festivals (Unleavened Bread – Passover – Weeks and Booths) or by the priests as they ascended the fifteen steps to minister at the Temple in Jerusalem – these were *periodic events* that people *repeated* on a *regular* basis. And these ascents – these approaches to Jerusalem and the Temple provided reason to *focus* and to *rejoice*. Focus on the reason for the journey – to worship Almighty God – Yahweh. Focus on the state of the mind and heart before Almighty God – Yahweh. Focus on His great provision in your life – even the widow with two mites understood this and obeyed by giving back to Yahweh her provider....so there you are ascending the hill to Jerusalem...and as you continue in your travels – consciously reminding yourself and your companions of these things using these Psalms – you find yourself beginning to rejoice in Almighty God! And this leads to one place – one state of mind and of heart....that is like that of the weaned child spoken of in Psalm 131.

Charles Spurgeon, in a sermon on Psalm 131, says

"Now, a weaned child is entirely dependent upon its mother. It knows nothing about how it is to be fed. It could not feed itself, and it must die if deprived of the care of another. But it rests quietly, free from even a trace of anxiety. I find that the Hebrew gives the idea of a child lying in its mother's bosom, perfectly satisfied." – Charles Spurgeon

Not sure if Spurgeon's words lean you to think this state is more or less achievable than you initially thought a moment ago, but I would point out a few things:

- 1) This is, of course, only possible in Jesus. Since the Father is completely pleased with the Son, the Son can be completely contented in the Father. And this level of contentment can be found in your heart only if Jesus, the Son, resides in it. I should say only if you reside in Him, much in the same way that the little child's identity is still completely wrapped up in his parents'.
- 2) This contentment didn't just spontaneously descend upon the original singers of these Psalms. They engaged in the periodic repeating of these words year in and year out during these gatherings/journeys for the purpose of worshipping Yahweh, which served as a refreshing reminder. Humility, simplicity, dependence, trust, hope in Yahweh forevermore. These characteristics are Christ's and are promoted in us, God's elect, through the regular gathering of His people, the Church where, together, we sing and fellowship and draw near to worship. This is where we share our journey together toward Him who called us to Himself. This is where the process of making us like the child, the little infant that He picked up in His arms in Matthew 18, is being worked out in us by Christ Himself...here, together with family.

So, children, I think, have a particularly interesting and terribly important place in the family, do they not? I have spoken primarily, thus far, of how they are in our midst to provide a picture of what we are to become in Christ. I know it sounds kind of backwards...ironic even. I mean, aren't we supposed to show them the way to go?

In preparing for this morning, I listened to part of an audiobook titled "How Children Raise Parents" by Dan Allender, hoping to obtain some useful quotes. And Friday evening, Landon was riding with me in the car and saw the title on the screen, and I listened as he did a double take and re-read the title to himself slowly, "How Children Raise Parents"initially perplexed he said "What? How is that even possible?!" But then the possibilities began to form in his mind..."That would be awesome!" I asked what he meant. "Hey Dad, go clean your room!" and he starts laughing. "Is that what raising you boils down to?" I asked him. He thought a second, "Well, I guess I'd have to cook for you!" And so, he summed up all my skills, wisdom, and investment of multiple years from his perspective. See, I told you that kids and humiliation...I mean humility went together!

So children are a picture to us. But they are so much more than that. God has provided in them an opportunity – I'd even venture to say a calling – to serious 'on the job training' for adults. In 1st Cor 13, in helping to explain the how the imperfect, partial things of now will pass away when the perfect comes, Paul pointed to an example of a process that is very familiar to us all – that of a child growing up.

1st Corinthians 13: 11

11When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.

Thoughts:

And though Paul was using this process as an example to highlight another point, I'd like to use the statement to make a point. Children remind us that **growth & development toward maturity is 1) natural, 2) necessary, 3) a process, and 4) although natural, needs input from outside of them** (direction, guidance, nourishment, etc.) We look to them and are reminded that, as children of God, we need to continue toward maturity every day. When we provide that input – that direction, guidance, nourishment, teaching, etc. – to children, we, ourselves, are growing in maturity. We are being sanctified in the process.

God's Gift To Us – Maturing Christians Need Children

Need may be a strong word here. But children are definitely helpful to our sanctification process. How are we being sanctified, you may ask? Though there could be a full sermon on this point alone, let it suffice for now for us to make a brief correlation between us serving children's needs and Christ serving our needs.

Christ did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped – to be held on to – but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant. When any believer puts aside his own interests and considers others more significant than himself, he is becoming more like Jesus. Children give us frequent opportunities to set

aside our own interests and desires don't they? You just fell asleep...the crying starts. You just turned on the news...the yelling and arguing starts. You just scheduled your first time away with your spouse in months and had the babysitter all lined up...the fever starts. You just sat down to a piping hot meal after a long day at work...the barrage of questions start. You've given instruction...and the disobedience starts. You just sat down on a Sunday morning at church after a terrible week & need rest and restoration for yourself...and the screen is flashing "ITM-ASSIST NEEDED". In all of these types of situations, you are being given an opportunity. Will you allow the Spirit to quiet your soul, much as a child lets their trusted parent, aunt, uncle, or grandparent calm and soothe them, and offer yourself to God in those moments to be used by Him to minister to the little ones in this family, whether you're doing so as a parent or aunt or uncle or grandparent in Christ?

When I remember what's at stake, it helps me repent of my selfish inward focus on my own desires and comfort and helps me to let go of any thought of "my rights". At the end of the day, what's at stake is our children's souls. They are not merely battling immaturity and selfishness. Their problem is a sin problem, just like ours is. And we have been called to have the mind of Christ, who had our sin problem in clear focus in every teaching He gave and in every action He took – especially that of going to the cross.

Brad is going to continue with this topic next week and further develop the next point...how children need mature Christians to help them deal with this sin problem through discipline, instruction, structure, among other things – all of which ultimately point them to and lead them to Christ. But before we leave the current point – that maturing Christians need children – I want to make sure the analogies I am drawing aren't taken too far – they are only analogies, after all. Investing your time and energy into children's physical, emotional, social, psychological needs, and so on is indeed of some value to your own sanctification process. But verse 4 of Matthew 18 reminds us that Jesus is considering any who believe in Him as those who have already become like the child he is holding in his arms. That belief in Him is what gains anyone entry into the kingdom of Heaven. Therefore, I would encourage you to not forget that as you invest time and energy in others, whether they are the actual little ones in our midst or whether it is a brother or sister in Christ, a fellow 'little one' in Him, ...to have – like Jesus did – a clear focus on the biggest problem facing us – our sin. In this offering of yourself to others, it teaches them and reminds them that Jesus has paid the price for all sin, and you will find that you are being sanctified – being made more like Jesus as you humble yourself to give that offering.

God's Gift To Us – Children Need Mature Christians

Like I said, Brad is going to dive further into this point next week. I want to encourage us to hear his teaching next week, however, in the context set here today. That we have something very important to learn from children that sets us up to provide them what they need from us. Humility of spirit that leads us to admit that we need Jesus to save us. Humility of spirit and a lack of concern for status that allows us to give ourselves to others, after the example of Christ, and experience sanctification, becoming more like Jesus. And, isn't that exactly what the children in our midst need from us? Christ Himself working in and through us in guiding, teaching, disciplining, encouraging, structuring, raising them in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Conclusion

And this is our desire and goal for the children that God brings into our midst at Grace Community, that we provide a safe environment for them to be raised in the training and instruction of the Lord. This is why we provide the children's ministry and this is the end to which Keisha coordinates it. Furthermore, the elders are very interested at all times in the growth of all ministries. We are discussing a couple of items currently with respect to the growth of the children's ministry. One is additional classes prescribed for them near the end of their elementary years as they transition to youth age. These will be semester long or longer and build on the strong tradition of catechism type classes that the orthodox church has provided to children throughout history. We're also discussing topics such as baptism and church membership as it relates to children and youth.

And as we close today, Keisha's going to come and share for a moment and remind us about the what and how of GCC's children ministry – how these truths that we have been discussing today play out as adults and kids are interacting week in and week out here at Grace....

Keisha

In our **Infant & Toddler ministry**, the foundation of their spiritual growth begins with building relationships. Infants and toddlers bond with their parents and other caregivers who look after their physical and emotional needs. Because adults care for their needs, infants develop a sense of trust. According to the psychologist Erik Erikson, infants who successfully learn to trust develop hope. And Hebrews 11:1 tells us, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." In the first two years of life, the foundational concepts of spiritual formation- trust and hope-grow.

In our **Preschool** rooms, we continue building these relationships with trusted adults, where we can then more fully introduce the concept of a loving Creator, God, who made us and loves us. Our preschoolers relate to God as they hear stories from the Bible about God loving people He made. They learn how God's people in the Bible are just like us because they sin, or disobey God, just like they disobey their parents. But God loved them, and us, so much that He sent His only Son, Jesus, to come and die on the cross so that their hearts could be made clean from sin and they could be forgiven. They learn to apply truths from the Bible through activities and crafts that relate to their Bible stories. They also have time to play with other children to learn to share, create, and relate to others.

Our ministry to **Elementary-aged children** teaches the importance of worshiping God through music, prayer, and time learning God's Word. Our K-2nd grade children participate in singing and prayer with their peers in a small group setting. Our 3rd-5th graders have worship modeled for them as they participate in corporate worship with you. They see their parents adoring Jesus, calling out to Him in prayer, sharing the needs of the church family, and the importance of giving a portion of what God has given to us. After worship, all K-5th graders participate in The Gospel Project curriculum where they are introduced to a theme- for example, "talents"- through a small group activity or game. Then they gather as a larger group of 15-25 kids, where they are asked a big picture question like "Why does God give us abilities and gifts?" They find the answer to that question in their bible story "The Parable of the

Talents". The answer "God gives us abilities & gifts to use FOR HIM!" is shared in their bible story video & discussion with their small group leaders and classmates. In August, they will finish this 3-year chronological study of the Bible, where they have learned that every story in the Bible points to Jesus.

The biggest reward in working with these beautiful children is seeing the truth in Jesus' words in Matthew 18:3, 3 Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." These children are hard-wired with curiosity about their Creator. They desire to understand and ask questions, to hope, to trust and believe. They are excited about who God is and want to relate to Him. They want to share what they learn. So, in fact, they teach me. About childlike faith. And in turn, my faith in Jesus, and the great work He has done, and is doing, in their lives AND MINE, grows! I find myself looking to Jesus and seeing Him all over again in a fresh, new way. Smiling faces, speaking volumes of truth, remind me of the best place I can be- in the lap of Jesus, trusting Him. What greater privilege can we have than teaching these little ones?!